



Talks revived

THROUGH the efforts of foreign interlocutors, the failed parleys between Afghanistan and Pakistan in Istanbul have been salvaged, yielding an extension in the ceasefire, and a promise from both sides to meet again in Turkiye next week to firm up the details. As reported, Pakistani representatives were at the airport on Thursday when they were called back by the hosts to give diplomacy with the Afghan Taliban another shot. On Wednesday, Pakistani officials had said the talks had collapsed, mainly due to the Afghan side's refusal to give explicit guarantees that their soil would not be used by anti-Pakistan militants such as the TTP.

The development is welcome, and the tone of officials indicates that a breakthrough may be possible. For example, the FO spokesman said on Friday that Pakistan hopes for a "positive outcome" from the Nov 6 talks. A mechanism to verify the ceasefire and ensure peace at the border has been agreed to, and this can be the starting point for a more formal peace plan. The key problem remains Pakistan's legitimate concern that terrorist groups in Afghanistan are not being prevented from staging attacks against this country, and Kabul's ambiguous stance on the issue. According to reports, the Taliban negotiators said they could not fully control the TTP, particularly their attacks inside Pakistan. While internal security is indeed Pakistan's own responsibility, it is the Taliban's duty — as the de facto government in Kabul — to stop terrorist groups from crossing over into Pakistan. If they cannot stop cross-border terrorism, how can the Taliban be expected to be taken seriously as Afghanistan's legitimate administration? However, the Pakistani side's reported demand that the Taliban declare the TTP a fitna may be unrealistic. The Taliban and the TTP are cut from the same ideological cloth, hence, we should not expect any such edicts from Kabul or Kandahar.

Much will depend on what the Taliban bring to the table in Istanbul next week. Hopefully they will realise that without a verifiable mechanism and commitment to stop cross-border terrorism, long-term peace with Pakistan will be difficult. Meanwhile both sides, including high officials in Pakistan, should shun intemperate language that could imperil the parleys. While Pakistan's stance against terrorist groups like the TTP should be clear, aggressive commentary should be avoided. And as this paper has stated, with cooperation from Muslim states, such as Qatar and Turkiye, which have been instrumental in hosting the talks, as well as regional allies, Kabul should be pressed further on terrorism. For example, along with the TTP, the Taliban also host Al Qaeda, ETIM and IS-K. These groups have staged attacks on regional states, which is why a coordinated, transnational counterterrorism policy is needed to address the problem of militants based in Afghanistan.

Self-sabotage

NOTHING, it seems, can stop the PTI from shooting itself in the foot every now and then. The latest in its series of self-harming public spats is the controversy over the removal of the party's central Punjab president and secretary, which may or may not have been decided by incarcerated former prime minister Imran Khan on Oct 16, when he met Barrister Gohar Ali Khan and Salman Akram Raja in Adiala jail. As is the case with most matters involving the PTI's decision-making apparatus, the who, what and why varies depending on whom one asks. Apparently, PTI central Punjab president Ahmad Chattha and general secretary Bilal Ejaz were removed on instructions supposedly conveyed by Mr Imran Khan to Barrister Gohar. Mr Raja had initially expressed unawareness of any such instruction from the PTI chief but had then deferred to Mr Gohar's reassurances. The embarrassing twist came when the PTI chief's X account posted a tweet appreciating the loyalty and sacrifices of the dismissed individuals. "I have not issued any orders for their removal," Mr Khan was quoted as saying. Meanwhile, another dispute was playing out over who gets to decide who meets Mr Khan in jail.

As the party reels from what its own leaders have described as "a mockery", one cannot help but point out that lack of internal order and discipline has been the PTI's hallmark. Even when in power, the party operated in chaotic ways, with controversy following controversy, and leaders coming and going as if through revolving doors. As the pressure has continued to pile up, it is this trait that has turned into the PTI's biggest weakness. No matter how stoically the PTI chief deals with his predicament, and no matter how invincible he has convinced others he is, his party has remained unable to keep up. Perhaps this is by design; perhaps he believes he must remain central and indispensable in the PTI's affairs, or else the party may move on without him. Whatever the case may be, the PTI seems to have very little more to contribute at this point. The constant infighting is hurting its ability to offer any meaningful opposition to the current regime, or to deliver any relief for its jailed leadership. If the party hopes to remain a serious political contender, it must first learn to govern itself.

Drought warning

THE Met Department's warning, which places 12 districts of Balochistan under drought watch, should come as no surprise. What is worrying is the authorities' lack of preparedness to cope with an environmental challenge in a province that is already highly vulnerable to drought. Balochistan has an arid climate marked by erratic rainfall, extreme temperature fluctuations and prolonged dry spells. Vast swathes of its western and south-western parts have recorded rainfall deficits of up to 79pc between May and October. With more and more rainless days, the province is experiencing acute water stress that is crippling agriculture and livestock, the backbone of rural livelihoods. The forecast of below-normal rainfall and above-normal temperatures between November and January can further aggravate conditions.

The province has seen many severe droughts, some lasting for years. Research shows that prolonged dry spells destroyed nearly 80pc of fruit orchards, drastically reduced yields of rain-fed crops, and led to the death of some 2m animals. Repeated droughts, coupled with excessive water extraction, has resulted in a sharp fall in groundwater table levels, and rendered the *karez* irrigation systems dysfunctional. Heatwaves have also intensified, increasing both the frequency and severity of drought events. The latest warning is not merely a meteorological concern; it is a reminder of the persistent failure of the provincial leadership and bureaucracy to manage the country's most water-stressed and drought-prone province. The Met Department's call for early action must be heeded now to avert a humanitarian disaster. The increasing frequency of drought conditions demands a long-term strategic plan by the provincial authorities to invest in modern water conservation technologies, restore indigenous irrigation systems and reduce local communities' dependence on rain-fed agriculture. Those who have witnessed the devastating impact of recurring droughts know that the time to protect the province from intensifying weather extremes is running out.

OPINION



BY BASIL NABI MALIK

Coding conduct

Designed to uphold judicial independence, the Code of Conduct could result in suppressing it.

TRADITIONAL Pakistan has long been aware of the destructive nature of coups — the abrupt toppling of political governments and their replacement with autocratic regimes marked by little to no accountability. Under such regimes, the noose tightens around dissent, crackdowns on diversity become routine, and tolerance for alternative opinions vanishes.

In relation to this, we can perhaps be somewhat grateful that such blatant usurpations of power are no longer in fashion. However, that does not mean that such autocratic tendencies have disappeared. Where once political governments were sent packing on charges of plane hijackings, ironically, today, the victims of those alleged hijackings are accused of 'hijacking' the judiciary itself.

Through the 26th Amendment, the executive and legislature had been given de facto control over judicial appointments, bench selections, and judicial performance evaluations. Efforts to convene a full court to determine the amendment's validity had been neutralised, at least till now, the seniority of Islamabad High Court judges had been tampered with, some judges were parachuted in to keep others out, courts were packed with judges perceived to favour the amendment, and whether or not such a perception is accurate, an impression had been created that the constitutional bench of the Supreme Court had become a treasury bench, while the one in Sindh had become the 'people's bench'.

In these troubling times, some dissent persisted, primarily on the part of a handful of judges in the Supreme Court and the high courts. These judges were never an existential threat to the new system crafted by the establishment, nor are their present protests or expressions of concern a real danger to its continuation. Their dissent and expressions of grievance were, and perhaps remain, an inconvenience.

Even that, however, is now intolerable. With the notification of the revised Code of Conduct, it is apparent that dissent of any kind is unacceptable, and that conformity is not a choice but a compulsion. Nothing makes this more evident than the decision to borrow from resolutions

passed in the dark days of the Musharraf era, a time when democracy was a fairy-tale and autocracy was fair game.

Article V of the Code deals with public controversies and how to avoid them. The earlier version was broad and generic; the new one is sweeping in scope, with a tendency to expand into every form of expression. Notably, it now prohibits public controversies arising from any "speech, writing, debate or comment at any forum" — essentially covering all forms of free speech. Yet "public controversies" remain undefined, leaving the article ripe for misuse.

The same article further states that a judge shall "not cause any judicial or administrative matter to be discussed publicly, nor shall he make public any communication relating to his personal or official matters". On the face of it, it may seem fine. However, there is a deeper concern involved in the phrasing of this section. How is a judge to ensure that any of his remarks, observations, or findings — whether during the course of proceedings in court or in a written judgement — do not "cause" public discussion or controversy? Public reaction lies well beyond a judge's control, and is that not what is expected of a judge? Moreover, a judge may, at times, need to justify or reason a decision by citing communications relating to personal or official matters. Once cited, these inevitably enter the public record — leaving the judge technically liable for misconduct under this vaguely worded provision.

Another notable revision concerns judges' attendance at social events, gatherings, and functions, which the Code now directs them to abstain from altogether. Even soliciting an invitation to an international conference, amongst other things, regardless of whether it pertains to legal issues, could constitute misconduct. This restriction is alarming, as international conferences and similar forums allow judges to engage with diverse perspectives, broaden their understanding, and stay informed on current global developments.

Additionally, if a judge is personally criticised or his character attacked, he or she is stopped from responding in any form. Instead, an institu-

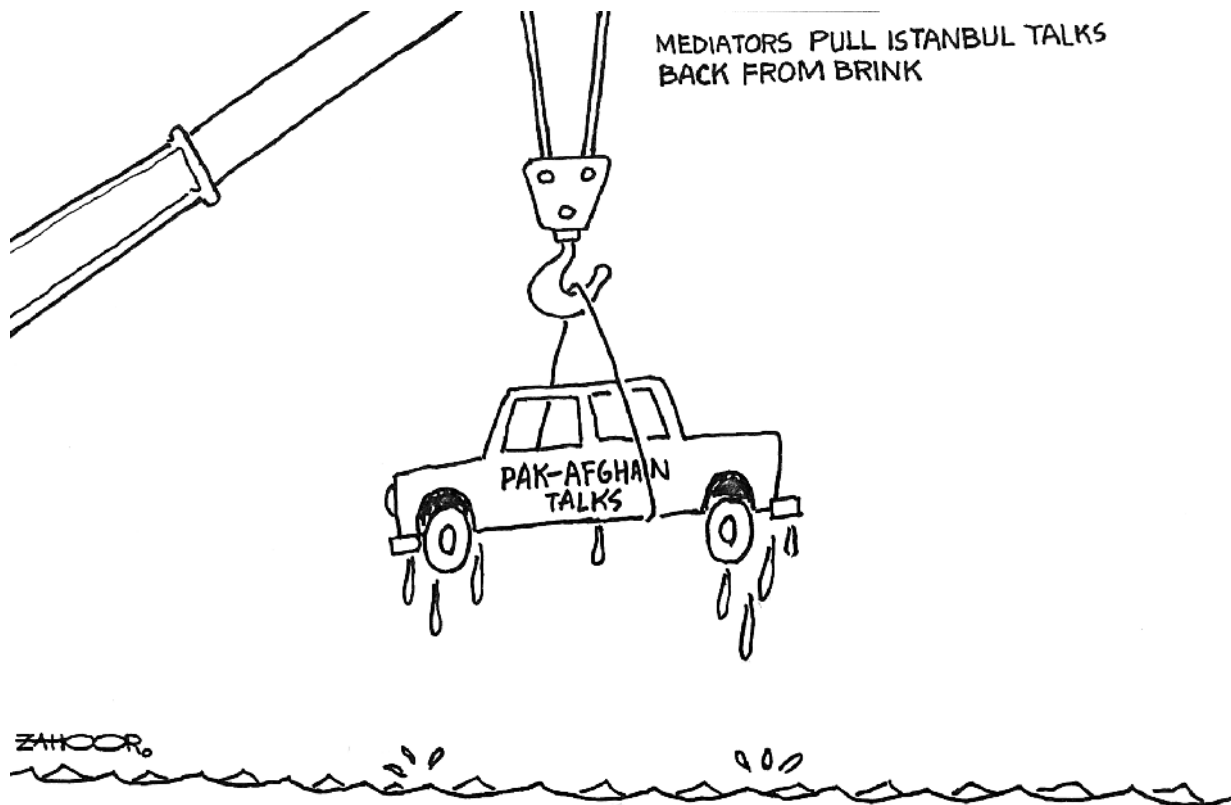
tional response is prioritised. Similar processes apply to attempts to influence judges. Yet if history is any guide, institutional responses — particularly in times of turmoil — tend to be timid, if not entirely absent.

Clauses such as these might be uncontroversial in mature democracies where the judiciary operates independently, free from legislative or executive influence. In such systems, where safeguards against interference and corruption are firmly embedded, and where an overall culture of respect is found between and amongst the various institutions themselves, a code of conduct of this nature could function effectively. But in countries where democracy is 'made to order' — and that too by those whose names appear nowhere in the Constitution as governing authorities — such codes serve instead as Damocles' swords hanging over the heads of independent judges, or those who dare to express independent thoughts, even sparingly.

In such circumstances, such a Code of Conduct may well serve more so as a tool of misuse as opposed to a shield against wrongdoing. In essence, it may be used to manufacture misconduct as opposed to regulating conduct, with its real purpose being to cull independence, remove judges who think freely, and to protect those who do not. Designed to uphold judicial independence, it could result in suppressing it.

Some may think that we are going out of our way to highlight the 'possible' misuse of this code, where no actual misuse has, in fact, come to light. However, in the context of a strained system already finding it hard to give a voice to the people, it is not far-fetched. In fact, in these times, if anything may be perceived as far-fetched, it would be its innocent, effective and judicious use without misapplication. And this is why it may not be improper to state that this Code, in its present form, may do wonders in established democratic orders, but may wreak havoc in others. Unfortunately, whether we like it or not, in today's world, we are 'the others'. ■

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BY MURAD MOOSA KHAN

A manmade mental crisis

"We need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they're falling in" — Desmond Tutu

THERE is much talk of a 'mental health crisis' in Pakistan currently. Campaigns for 'raising awareness and reducing stigma' have been launched, encouraging people to talk about and seek help for mental health issues. There is a call for increased funding, upscaling mental health services and integrating mental health into primary care. These are all important and mental health definitely needs to be prioritised. But it is also equally important to reflect on what is driving this mental health crisis in Pakistan and what can be done about it.

The mental health crisis is not merely a health issue. It is a reflection of how power, inequality, and governance intersect to shape the emotional lives of millions of Pakistanis. The crisis is not a natural disaster but manmade — the outcome of 78 years of brutalisation of the people through social and economic injustice, political instability and structural poverty.

Pakistan's history is defined by political turbulence. For almost half of its existence, Pakistan has had direct military rule and an indirect one even when there is a façade of civilian government. The events of the last three years, the stolen mandate, state violence and oppression, emasculation of the judiciary and parliament have all but eroded what little public trust there was in state institutions. This has serious psychological consequences. Pakistanis live in a permanent state of uncertainty. Political chaos is fuelling collective anxiety, cynicism, and a loss of civic sense. Fear and distrust have become national emotions.

For millions of Pakistanis, psychological suffering is inseparable from economic hardship. Rising inflation, unemployment and collapsing purchasing power has turned everyday life into a test of survival. When families cannot afford school fees or electricity bills, when people feel they cannot make ends meet, when savings evaporate overnight, mental distress is the natural outcome. Poverty is not only material deprivation; it is psychological violence inflicted by an unequal system.

Over 60 per cent of Pakistan's population is under 30 years of age. What should be a demographic dividend has become a demographic crisis. Young people face shrinking opportunities, high unemployment, and an outdated education system disconnected from labour markets. Merit is sacrificed for nepotism and favouritism; hard work is replaced by connections. A society that denies its youth opportunity also denies them hope. No wonder every other young person wants to leave the country.

This suffering is not a 'test of God'; it is political. The failure to provide social justice, address poverty, provide basic necessities, to control corruption — by neglecting social development —

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represents a deliberate abdication of state responsibility. The emotional cost is borne silently in our homes and workplaces across the country. This is criminal.

Among the many silent tragedies, Pakistan is the tragedy of suicides. The World Health Organisation estimates that between 13,000-20,000 people die by suicide each year and 10-20 times more attempt suicide, mostly by young people, under the age of 30 years. Poverty and unemployment stand out as major causes. This in a country that was created in the name of Islam, whose central tenet is social justice. We need to ask ourselves why then is the prohibition on suicides not having its deterrent effect in a country with 97pc Muslims.

This silence is strategic. To confront the mental health crisis would be to confront its root causes — poverty, inequality, corruption, and misgovernance. Instead, individuals are told to be patient, to pray, or to endure. Endurance, in this context, is not resilience; it is resignation.

There is no greater insult than to label the silent suffering of Pakistanis as 'resilience'. People have no choice but to struggle on.

Addressing the mental health crisis in Pakistan requires far more than setting up clinical services, increasing the number of psychiatrists and psychologists, setting up crisis helplines or offering interventions through apps or digital platforms. It demands a reordering of political and economic priorities. This means addressing the root causes of the mental distress of the population. We need truly representative governments, not one that is imposed on us. We need to curb corruption, which has eaten into the moral fabric of our society. We need to declare a national emergency in education in the country. Why are 25m children out of school in Pakistan? What is the future for them? We can spend billions of dollars over four days in a 'war' with one of our neighbours but cannot provide universal health coverage to our people.

Nearly one in three Pakistanis are estimated to be in need of mental healthcare. Yet, there is no separate budget for mental health and mental health spending is estimated to be less than 0.5pc of the national health budget. Whatever little is there, is eaten up by corruption and mismanagement. Access to psychiatric care remains confined to a few major cities, where it is largely unaffordable for the vast majority.

Pakistan's vulnerability to climate change has added a devastating dimension to the mental distress of its population. The 2022 floods displaced over 30m people, destroying homes, livelihoods, and communities. It was replayed in the recent floods in Punjab and KP. Many survivors continue to experience post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and depression — yet mental health remains absent from national disaster response and recovery plans. A nation's true strength is measured not by the size of its economy or its armed forces, but by peace of mind of its citizens. Until Pakistan learns to prioritise the mental well-being of its people as a central pillar of its policies, our crisis of the mind will remain, silently but unmistakably, of our own making. ■

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